

Lent II - 08 December 2013

In the beginning was the Word

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Text: *John 1:1-18*

Nelson Mandela died this week. A goatherd in his youth and the first in his family to get an education – by dint of circumstance, who he was, and what he believed – he gained the respect of millions around the world. Those amongst us with personal experience in South Africa will have a particular sense of both his contribution and loss. What seems clear is that his name will join those of Martin Luther King Jr and Mahatma Ghandi as an icon of non-violence in confronting gross human injustice and brutality. Mandela's power, like that of his predecessors, lay in how he tied word to deed – first the word, then the deed reflected in his own behaviour, and also that of others. You may have seen his first speech in Jo'burg after release from prison in 1990 – to a vast and rapt audience in a huge football stadium. It was a violent time, and many no doubt were ready to heed a call to arms. Instead, at the end of his speech he said words to this effect: “when you leave let no window, not a head, be broken” – and they obeyed. No heads or windows were broken. The power of the word!

In the Beginning was the Word

Nearly 2000 years ago a man named John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, wrote about the power of the word as a preamble to his account of Jesus life. In writing his gospel, John must have sensed that stories of Jesus' beginnings might well end up like a folktale. Where Matthew and Luke began with birth stories of Jesus, John began with: “In the beginning was the Word”.

The birth stories are wonderful, and Christmas wouldn't be the same without them. We decorate our churches and homes with nativity scenes, place a star or an angel atop a Christmas tree, and enjoy our children and youth when they perform parts of the nativity play. For these memories of Jesus' early life we thank Matthew and Luke.

For John, though, the beginnings lie elsewhere. He doesn't introduce us to the babe in Bethlehem; rather, he introduces us to the mysteries of the cosmic Christ with the profound announcement that Jesus is the "in the beginning" creative Word of God who had become embodied (incarnated) as a human being to be the light of life for the world.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” This opening sentence, along with those following in today's text, is one of my most favorite passages in the Bible – partly because I've always been intrigued by words and their nuances and shifting meanings, but more importantly because this preamble to John's gospel contains much of what is central to the the Biblical story.

John was writing for Gentiles and Jews who understood Greek – Greek being the international language of his day – and when he said “In the beginning was the Word” (‘the *logos*’ in Greek), theologians tell us he would have been understood by both Gentiles and Jews as speaking not of the kind of ‘word’ you or I might write or say; rather, Word (or *Logos*) would have been understood as referring to an expression of God's will or of the spirit or the mind of God who continues through time. So, when John opens with ‘in the

beginning', he invites us to recall the God who was there at the beginning of time as recorded in the first verse of the Old Testament – "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).

And, when he says "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," he was not talking about the gods one reads about in Greek literature such as the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, distant gods who viewed the world with detachment. Rather, in this and subsequent verses, John conveys a God who cared passionately about his creation. More than that, John says Jesus is the creative word of God, linked with God from before time, sent amongst us as a witness to God's light – he pitched his tent, he camped among us – to reveal God's grace and truth to those who recognized him for what he was. The remainder of John's gospel elaborates on this preamble.

The Mystery of the Word

Part of what I like about this preamble is how it speaks to the mystery of how we understand and relate to God. Our tendency is to anthropomorphize – to give human characteristics to things we care about but aren't human. Most of us with pets do it. Books from *Alice in Wonderland* to the *Hobbit* and many others are filled with animal and other, even inanimate, characters having human motives and emotions – think the Queen of Hearts. And, when it comes to understanding God, we humans have the same tendency. It seems easier to relate to a God that has the human form and qualities we understand, even though if we think about it a moment or two one realizes how inadequate such a thought is.

But when John says "in the beginning was the *Logos*" we don't have the luxury of sticking with our anthropomorphized ideas – my mind, at least, does a jump shift to an order of thinking not entirely familiar or comfortable. No one previously had ever seen God, John tells us in v. 18. We have reports of encounters with aspects of God in the Old Testament – encounters associated with the blowing of the Spirit and fire, as by Moses or Elijah – and again after Jesus' death and resurrection at Pentecost, as well as by others of the saints in later writings; but, that was not God – it was an aspect of God.

The closest we came to seeing God was through 'the Word made flesh' John tells us – the Word, a part of God, came to us in the form of a child he says, a form we can surely recognize. It seems God understood that only through a human representation of part of God would we (could 'I') begin to get a more personal and practical picture of God's desire for us (for me).

The idea of revealing the Word through the birth of a child is so simple, yet so profound.

A Further Mystery in how God dwells within us and in our relationships.

We are blessed to have many children amongst us. Each newborn is a mystery of creation. Oh, we know the biological ways in which children are conceived, and have technologies to help when ordinary means aren't possible. But where does the baby's spirit, the soul, come from? And, where does the spirit go when we die?

Genetics, nurture and environment all play a part in shaping who we are in growing up, but none of these could really be said to touch on the essence of the little person born. Neither can our knowledge of neurons or 'the heart' or even stem cells. Wilder Penfield, arguably Canada's most notable neurosurgeon, before he died said that the more he knew the brain,

the less he understood 'the mind'. By 'mind', he was putting a scientific spin on at least a part of what in faith language we call 'spirit' or 'soul'.

While these are mysteries none have cracked, they also speak to an essence of God's presence amongst us. From what I've read in the Bible and elsewhere, I'm led to believe that a little bit of God is in each one of us when we are born. And, it's up to each person born to decide what to do with that grain of spirit. That's what undergirds our practice of believer's baptism.

More than that, the mystery of God's Word, the *Logos*, goes beyond the spirit within an individual person. One of the reasons us Mennonites stress community so much is that we've concluded it's difficult if not unbiblical for faith to be privatized. The words of Jesus, "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matt. 18:12), ring true to us. While we believe it's up to each one of us as individuals to decide whether or not to commit our life to following the way of Jesus the Christos, we also hold to the tenet that God's spirit within us is best realized when we come together in His name in small groups and large. It's then that we discern how to live out the possibilities of our better selves. It's then that we are jointly witness to God's light in the cosmic darkness around us.

But, that's within a people committed to seeking God. What happens when one lives in conditions of despair, where God seems far away? I don't know that Nelson Mandela was a man of faith, though he probably was well acquainted with it. I understand he was baptized in his home area, probably as a child; but, of itself that doesn't tell us anything. Whatever his earlier experiences, he surely encountered something of the God spirit within him during the years when imprisoned on Robben Island. It was while he lived under brutal conditions there that he came to believe the way forward for all his people was to turn the other cheek, and to forgive those who had brutalized them.

Another man, Viktor Frankl, experienced a similar, if not worse, experience. He survived the brutality of a Nazi concentration camp. In one of the most influential books of the 20th century, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl says that as time passed in the concentration camp, the prisoner's experience finally became nothing but a remembered nightmare, and that he knows that he has nothing left to fear any more, "except his God". And, with that realization, Frankl had another insight. The people who survived were those who had an image of hope to hang on to, an image of love that transcended their abysmal conditions. It was out of this insight he developed a therapy to help people come to learn meaning in their lives - 'Logos Therapy' he called it - the same Logos used by John.

Mandela and Frankl found the capacity to choose God's spirit in dire circumstances where most around them didn't. They aren't alone. Our Mennonite history is filled with stories of people making similar decisions in times of brutality and confinement.

Our circumstances today aren't as dire, at least not for the most part. Still, a similar choice is ours to make. There is nothing automatic about faith - it requires choice. It also requires discipline. One doesn't play a piano well without practice.

That's what's so inspiring about our annual celebration of the coming of the Word in the form of a babe. It's an annual reminder that our lives are enmeshed in two-thousand, nay four-thousand, years of history. And, if we are going to give ourselves over to our Christian faith, to our choice, then the first thing - the continuing thing - we need to do is to reflect

and listen. We are in a room with others where a conversation has been going on for a very, very long time – and we need to understand what we can of that conversation – both to inform ourselves, and then to share with others.

Advent, then, is a time to think about the babe in the manger this Christmas – and to think on what gift you can give your loved ones, and to yourself, that reflects not only the earthly but also the cosmic nature of the Christ. It's a time to treat yourself (myself) and those precious to you with something that feeds our souls.

AMEN